

## Attention Seeking Children in the Classroom

Teachers and parents need practical help on how to respond to the attention seeking child, argues *Nigel Mellor*, rather than guilt-inducing explorations into what may have begun the spiral of attention seeking behaviour years earlier.

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*Crawls under desk. Flicks ruler. Makes pig noises. Mixes up coats on pegs. Picks nose and puts into dinners. Bites hands. Tells whopper. Paints hair purple. Steals. Cries. Refuses to work.*

What do these behaviours have in common? The answer is they all bring a lot of attention: counselling, threats, punishments, advice, shouting, arguing, reasoning. And that is what the attention seeking child thrives on.

Although the term is commonly used in conversation, attention seeking has been little researched. It can be mistaken for almost any other difficulty - ADHD, attendance problems, stealing, etc. There is no check list of "symptoms". The best guide is simply the adult's own feeling - in this case, intense irritation. As one teacher commented about a very attention seeking 10 year-old "I veer between wanting to strangle her and give her a cuddle. She irritates me beyond words, then I get irritated because of that"<sup>1</sup>

### **The problem.**

When children behave in this way, they are almost impossible to ignore and the most caring of teachers and parents are those who are most vulnerable. What causes the greatest strain is that normal solutions don't work: "Some children ... seek punishment, because it is at least one way of gaining attention"<sup>2</sup>

Adults may be accustomed to a medical model: in other words, that problems reside "within" the child. Of course attention seeking can arise for many reasons - abuse, neglect, learning difficulties, etc. - and it is vital these conditions are recognised and,

wherever possible, addressed. For most children, however, no such causes are evident and although teachers often worry that behavioural approaches sweep the 'real' problems under the carpet, in the majority of cases it is clear that the attention seeking has become the problem.

Unfortunately we can find it hard to see our own part in the circular interactions at the heart of attention seeking, particularly when we feel stressed. And the children make it very personal! They learn very quickly which buttons to press. As one teacher exclaimed: "He blocks me from all the other children ... He drains all the compassion out of me ... I feel like it's my fault. I'm just drained at the end of it" <sup>3</sup>

### **Staying in the present.**

The parents we see feel very upset and confused. They may be looking to past events for an explanation of their child's behaviour. But this is usually a recipe for piling up guilt. Occasionally one clear trigger can be identified: the arrival of a new baby for instance, when the first child, suddenly becomes "dethroned" and acts out in order to regain lost attention.

But such a simple chain of events is rare. The crucial point is not what began the spiral ten years ago but what should be done about it now. The approach must be positive and practical and, above all, sensitive. There is no "magic pill", just careful strategies applied consistently. Some of these are familiar: ignoring, praising, punishing. Some may already be in use. The trick is both to get the balance right and to make them all effective, at school and at home: "Many teachers who believe they are "ignoring" behaviour may, in fact, be inadvertently reinforcing [it]"<sup>4</sup>

### **Making techniques effective**

Ignoring, for example, sounds so obvious and so simple. In fact it is a skill which requires close analysis and practice. Many teachers worry about the effect on the rest of the class of ignoring one child (although this is not usually such an issue for parents

at home). Special planning will overcome this. In addition, matters tend to become worse before they improve and adults must be prepared for this.

Rewarding and punishing are also full of pitfalls : “The other children felt that it was not really fair that he should be rewarded whilst he was behaving so badly”<sup>5</sup>

“Punishments don’t seem to bother him ... He wants my reaction.”<sup>6</sup> Positive attention must be given, but appropriately. Punishment must be carefully chosen.

Of course, tackling attention seeking does not solve all ills. Some children whose problems develop in an extreme way may display attention seeking in school as part of their difficulties. But there are many young people whose relationships and quality of life can be changed, sometimes dramatically, by tackling the issue of attention seeking directly.

Western philosophy has been heavily influenced by notions of linear causation. Circular causation is more difficult to grasp, particularly if we are part of the circle. While we seek a “cause” or try to figure out the deep seated reason behind some unusual behaviour, we can overlook the dance we have become unwitting partners in.

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“Attention Seeking: a practical solution for the classroom” by Nigel Mellor is published by Lucky Duck Publishing. A companion volume for parents is in preparation.

#### References

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3. Mellor op. cit. p.6
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5. Merrett, F (1993) *Encouragement Works Best.* London: David Fulton. p. 102
6. Mellor op. cit. p. 10